

Shaped by New Birth

Scriptures: Genesis 12:1–4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1–5, 13–17; John 3:1–17

There was a time in my early teen years when I was afraid to sleep at night. I would read while it was dark and then go to sleep when it began to get light. For some reason, I thought I might die during the night, but if I stayed awake, it wouldn't happen. One of the main reasons I didn't want to die was I wasn't sure I'd go to heaven. Maybe I had done something wrong that day and had failed to confess and ask God for forgiveness.

During that time, I was also worried that Jesus would return, all the real Christians would be raptured, and I would be left behind. Again, the reason I wouldn't go with Jesus was because of something I failed to do or did incorrectly.

Some of this angst was due to adolescence. Some was due to the political turmoil of the late 60's and early 70's. Some came from the emphasis in evangelism on the Romans Road, a series of five verses from the book of Romans that summarized the gospel. I concentrated on the verses about how everyone has sinned, and the wages of sin are death rather than the verses about God's love and gift of eternal life. Much of my angst came from a song by Larry Norman, "I Wish We'd All Been Ready." We'd often sing it in youth group, and I'd play it on the piano at home.

*Life was filled with guns and war
And everyone got trampled on the floor
I wish we'd all been ready
Children died the days grew cold
A piece of bread could buy a bag of gold
I wish we'd all been ready
There's no time to change your mind
How could you have been so blind
The father spoke the demons dined
The son has come and you've been left behind
You've been left behind
You've been left behind¹*

I don't recall how long my sleeplessness lasted or what happened to relieve my anxiety. Now there are other things that keep me up, or more commonly, wake me up in the middle of the night. A lot of it is age related. Occasionally, it's something else.

I assume this happens to you as well. Think of a time you woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't go back to sleep. It wasn't due to something you ate or drank, but because your mind refused to quiet down. Perhaps you were rehashing something that happened during the day – an argument, a success, devastating news. Maybe your thoughts centered on events or decisions from the more distant past – happy memories, regrettable choices, nostalgia for the way things used to be. Perhaps you were anticipating the day to come – an important project, a doctor's appointment, a long-awaited vacation. Maybe your mind was busy thinking about the future – college choice, career change, financial worries, retirement.

¹ [Larry Norman – I Wish We'd All Been Ready Lyrics | Genius Lyrics](#)

Sometimes you might have been pondering “big picture” questions. Who am I? Why am I here? What is God like? How does God work? It’s possible that you weren’t been able to sleep because God had spoken to you – directly, perhaps, but, maybe more likely indirectly, in some form.

I imagine Abram and Sarai, later renamed Abraham and Sarah, lost some sleep over the message they received from God. Think how you would feel if God said to you: *Get up and go! Leave your country and your relatives. Travel to the land I’ll show you. Don’t worry—I’ll guide you there. I have big plans for you and your descendants. I’m going to put a special blessing on you and cause your reputation to grow so that you will become a blessing and example to others. I’ll also bless those who help further you in your journey, and I’ll trip up those who try to trip you along the way. Through your descendants, all the families of the earth will be blessed.*²

It seems unlikely to me that the next events occurred exactly as they eventually were recorded. That without any hesitation, Abraham and Sarah packed up and left for Canaan.

It would take some time to get the people, possessions, and animals together before making such a big move. In the meantime, I imagine there were plenty of sleepless nights and discussions as Abraham and Sarah wondered about their response to these instructions. Even with a clear message from God, there was much they didn’t know about the future. And yet, even with much uncertainty, they set off on this new adventure. How many more sleepless nights did they have in the months and years ahead?

In his letter to the Romans, Paul highlight’s Abraham’s faith. Abraham trusted God – he had faith – before being a righteous follower of the law. Workers get paid for doing work, but grace comes from God as a gift to those who have faith, even before they do anything. It happened to Paul. He experienced God’s overflowing love and forgiveness before doing anything to deserve it. He received God’s grace. We know Abraham also experienced God’s grace, as he made mistakes – large and small – throughout his life.

Another person with lots of nighttime questions was Nicodemus.³ Nicodemus was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were one of four Jewish groups active in the time of Jesus. Along with the Hebrew scriptures, the Pharisees accepted all the additional traditional Jewish teachings as equally authoritative. The emphasis of their teaching was ethical – about what you should do – rather than theological – about what you should believe. They wanted to do the right thing so badly that they became very rigid and judgmental. Although the New Testament typically presents them as Jesus’ opponents, many of their views were similar to those adopted by early Christians.

Nicodemus was a leader of the Jews, a member of the Sanhedrin – the supreme judicial council. He was educated and, most likely, wealthy.

John makes a point of saying that Nicodemus visited Jesus at night. This could be viewed negatively, calling him a coward who snuck around in the dark to visit Jesus so he wouldn’t put his standing in the community at risk. A more favorable explanation is that the only time possible to have a long talk with Jesus was at night when there weren’t crowds of people around. In fact, the rabbis taught that the Scripture was best studied at night when it was quiet, and the distractions of the day had subsided. Nicodemus uses his precious study time to ask the big questions that had been keeping him awake.

He begins the visit by acknowledging that Jesus is a respected teacher, a rabbi. He acknowledges that the miraculous signs Jesus has been performing are evidence of God’s presence.

² Adapted from Genesis 4:1-3, The Voice.

³ Background information comes from *NRSV Reference Bible with Apocrypha*, Zondervan Publishing House, 1993, NT 29 and Stephen L. Harris, *Understanding the Bible*, 6th edition, McGraw-Hill, 2003, G-44

Nicodemus wants to investigate this further. We don't know for sure if his motives initially are pure or if he wants to discover something to use to discredit Jesus and his followers.

Let's look at two points Jesus makes during this nighttime conversation. In verses 3-9, he tells Nicodemus that in order to be part of the kingdom of God – to be part of the family of God, he must experience rebirth, he must be born again. Nicodemus takes this quite literally, and protests that he can't experience physical birth again. He's a grown man, for goodness sakes. Not that it would be possible for a baby to go back into the womb and be born again.

Jesus emphasizes rebirth in the spiritual sense. The Greek word he uses could mean either "from above" or "anew." Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. The birth Jesus is talking about is a God-initiated transformation.

Nicodemus has trouble understanding this. As a Pharisee, he's used to discussing the specific actions one must take to follow the letter of the law given to the Jews through Moses. He's spent more time talking about what one can and cannot do or what one can or cannot eat than he has talking about who God is and how one can have a relationship with God. Jesus is offering Nicodemus an awesome possibility, that the Spirit can blow through his preconceived notions and open him to something new, a new birth, a new way of life.

In verses 10-17, Jesus begins to articulate who he is. Jesus says he has authority because he came from heaven and will, in the end, return there. He is the one who will be "lifted up" and, like the healing image of the serpent in the desert found in Numbers 21, he has come so that the world might be saved, or more accurately, be healed through him. The purpose of his being lifted up is so that everyone and everything might be made whole and complete. This idea of shalom – wholeness, completeness, the way God intended things to be – is found throughout the entire Bible.

John 3:16 is one of the most familiar verses in the Bible. Along with verse 17, it sums up the gospel, the good news. *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.*⁴

A lot of religious baggage hangs on this text. The question, "Are you born again?" is often used in a weaponized way rather than an authentic way. The legitimacy of a person's born-again status is based more on the correct answers to questions of biblical authority, biblical interpretation, the virgin birth, the atonement, the method of baptism, the practice of communion, and authority in the church and at home than it is on inner spiritual life, relationship with God, and relationships with other people.

I just finished reading a memoir by Beth Moore, an evangelist, author, and Bible teacher.⁵ Beth was a life-long member of the Southern Baptist Church. She was born again as a young child and never doubted that decision. At age 18, she experienced a distinct moment when she sensed God's presence and felt a call to vocational Christian service. Beth volunteered as a Sunday school teacher for a class of women and developed a deep yearning to know the Bible. Her extensive study of scripture – on her own, not with any formal theological education – led to her speaking to women in other churches and then to a national speaking ministry. Her Bible studies were published and used by many groups – primarily women's groups – around the country.

Beth Moore was a victim of childhood sexual abuse by her father. When she criticized Christians – in particular, members of her denomination and others in the Evangelical movement – for dismissing and even covering up the moral flaws of politicians and church leaders who were perpetrators of sexual abuse, the backlash was tremendous. People removed her books from their libraries, returned them to the publisher, and even burned them. The uproar continued when she

⁴ John 3:16-17, *New Revised Standard Version*

⁵ Beth Moore, *All My Knotted-Up Life: A Memoir*, Tyndale House Publishers, 2023.

mentioned in a tweet that she would be teaching from the pulpit in a Southern Baptist Church on Mother's Day. It didn't matter that she was neither a liberal nor a feminist. That she believed in the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and the authority of the Bible. That she was completely pro-life. That she had been careful to have a man with greater authority than her present when her Bible studies included men. That she thought of herself as a teacher, not a preacher. None of that could overcome her perceived missteps and incorrect stances. Eventually, her publisher dropped her, and she left the denomination she had loved and been part of for more than sixty years.

This isn't unique to the Southern Baptist Convention. Denominations and individuals across the theological and political spectrums engage in dismissals and coverups of misdeeds. They're part of the cancel culture – making judgements on what they deem to be incorrect viewpoints and answers to specific questions without regard to the entirety of a person's beliefs and actions.

To me, this seems contrary to what Jesus says to Nicodemus. No one is saved by intellectual agreement with a specific belief. Salvation is all about the restoration of broken relationships. The action starts with God loving the world – the whole world – without qualifications, hesitations, exceptions, or prior demands. Then God sends the Son into the world. Those who trust and bond with the Son, become part of the Son's family. They are born anew and from above. They are siblings of equal status and become heirs of the kingdom: heaven, Spirit, light, truth, love, salvation, and eternal life. God didn't send Jesus to condemn the world; God sent Jesus to save the world. God desires shalom – wholeness, completeness, the way the world was created to be.

This isn't a one and done event. Consider Nicodemus. John doesn't tell us if Nicodemus understood and accepted what Jesus said to him that night, but he reappears several times in the gospel account. In John 7, he defends Jesus against other Pharisees and the chief priests. In John 19, he helps Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial.

Although Nicodemus first came to Jesus at night, he returns at least twice more in increasing daylight—and understanding. His does not appear to be an instantaneous conversion. He took a while to come to faith and to eventually be one who would not abandon Jesus near the end of his life. It's possible that even as his faith increased, many questions remained.

Sometimes we portray faith as a simple, linear process. But faith, like pregnancy and birth, is messy, bloody, broken, agonizing, ecstatic, fearful, and joyful. Rather than a sudden flash of light or a sudden vision of God speaking, it involves a series of steps that shape us and bring us closer to Jesus.

The best answer to the question “Are you born again?” is “Yes, each and every day. I'm in the process of reorienting myself and allowing this new birth to shape me. I hope that my beliefs continually shape my actions.”

I'd like to go back in time more than fifty years and comfort that girl staying awake all night. I'd like to tell her that it's all right to have doubts and questions – that God's grace is available to her even before she asks. I'd like to assure her she is ready – that God loves her and will care for her from her first breath to the last breath she breathes, from this day and forever.

Thanks be to God!